

# The Time Has Come | BY LOTHAR TRÄDER

Every fast growing organization will have to face the question of whether its structure is still befitting of its mission. Churches are no exception to this rule. The Seventh-day Adventist church, for several decades, has oscillated between two forms of governance: centralism and/or federalism. As a church historian I have attentively observed that development.

In 1995 in Utrecht, Robert Folkenberg played the centralist card when he was elected “first officer”, not “primus inter pares” (first among equals). The church had presumably learned lessons from recent controversies due to differing views on doctrine, and didn’t want to face another Glacier View, as in the case of Desmond Ford. The tendency of the motion of Robert Folkenberg was a clear shift towards centralism. There was not yet a pope in sight, only some shady contours. That is why resistance within the General Conference administration was substantial. I still remember the long queue at the microphones. In vain, the motion was voted.

At the same GC Session an opposing motion was put forward: the North American Division’s motion to ordain women. The motion was to leave it to the divisions to decide upon the matter; it was voted down. That was clearly a motion aiming for federalism. So two clearly opposing motions were being put forth at that session.

Every observer could see the problem that had arisen. So the GC, over the next few years, initiated several commissions to study this problem. For instance, at the 2004 year-end meeting a commission was organized to study steps

towards an administrative restructuring of the church. They were asked to present their findings only six months later. Obviously the church was in haste. In autumn 2005 a permanent commission was initiated. Jan Paulsen’s reason for this group was the rapid growth of the church. As he said: “there must be a better, more effective and efficient way of doing church.”

In that context we immediately hear a word that rings alarm bells for administrators (the NAD’s motion in 1995 was indeed aiming for self-determination): congregationalism. Why is that term so controversial? The original meaning of the word congregationalism is the deconstruction of an existing structure, in this case the dissolution of a worldwide Adventist Church, shifting competences towards the local church. This can hardly be a solution for our church, but something has to happen, and that quickly. San Antonio doesn’t leave us with any other conclusion. We can’t allow cultural majorities to determine theological and structural questions.

Our *Church Manual* lists different forms of church government and decides for what we call a representative form of church constitution. But it is exactly that governance which is faced with its own limitations. Just by sheer quantity, delegates of certain regions can block any motion just because it doesn’t suit their theological convictions or cultural habits. Other regions have to acquiesce, even if their cultural environment is different. The vote on the motion to make women’s ordination regional has shown that clearly.

So what can we learn from church history? In Germany we have two dominant churches: the

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Roman-Catholic and the Lutheran Church. Both have completely different forms of governance. The Roman-Catholic church champions a centralist structure with a pope in Rome, while the Lutheran Church (or better, churches) favors a federalist solution. The different federal churches (*Landeskirche*) are rallied together under the roof of the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* (EKD), with a president. The regional churches owe their existence to Luther. He determined the principalities of the different regions to be the administrative heads of the church, since for protestant churches there was no longer a pope. But as the sovereigns lost power, something had to be done. So every regional church has its own structure; sometimes headed by a bishop (e.g. Berlin-Brandenburg), sometimes a so-called president (e.g. Hessen-Nassau). These regional churches determine many of their questions independently. Their superstructure (EKD) provides the needed unity for public relations.

Both structures of church governance have proven reliable. Both churches have millions of members and could serve as an example for us. But we will have to decide soon, for the current situation is unbearable. The “representative” model is outdated, because it is not applicable to our church. It did serve us well in the first phase of our history, but the number of delegates alone will get us into trouble. Where will we find suitable venues to host business sessions for delegates if we don’t want to radically reduce their number? July’s vote on women’s ordination has shown that it is irresponsible to allow one cultural group to enforce their views on another group that holds different cultural convictions, just by the weight of their numbers. We can’t as yet see the damage that has been done by that vote. As of today, four days after the vote, I have received the first reports of requests for the removal of membership. These people tell me: “The church of San Antonio is not my church anymore!” And we are not talking about frustrated female pastors.

So what should we do? Could church history help us? What we do not want is another pope, that is clear, but the delegate structure has reached its limits. I would suggest an Adventist version of congregationalism: “unionism”. *Unio* = to unite, or more clearly: union = alliance, bond (esp. of states or churches with similar confessions). And that is exactly what is meant. We should aim at building relatively independent regional churches: an Adventist Church in Europe, an Adventist Church in North-America, South-

America, Africa, etc. This world alliance could replace the now existing General Conference. What competence this world alliance or the regional Churches could or should have, should be left to experts. I just want to insert a practical solution from church history into the overdue discussion.

Now is the time: the *kairos* of Texas is a real chance. Let us not stay deaf to the wake-up call of history. If we tarry any longer, we will have to face schism (another lesson from church history). If, for example, the already existing resolutions on women’s ordination in several fields continue to be implemented (and there is no reason to doubt that that will be the case), then the organizational structure of our church will fail. That is exactly what my model would prevent. We have to change our form of organization; and in order to avoid the contentious term congregationalism, I have decided to speak of “unionism”. A continental (regional) church could make intelligent decisions on its own, not only as far as ordination is concerned. Our “Adventist Church in Europe”, for example, could determine its own week-of-prayer edition, still championing the world-theme, but adapted to our cultural needs. The same applies to quotations and didactical questions of the Sabbath school quarterly.

The last day of business sessions in San Antonio saw just that kind of change to the *Church Manual*. Divisions were given the possibility to determine questions on their own without having to refer them on to the General Conference. This could be a first step. I appeal to all leaders of divisions and administrations, to initiate a bold structural change. If we don’t succeed in adapting our structure to accommodate healthy growth, we will soon witness qualitative and quantitative erosion. This kind of exodus has already begun in Europe and will be visible in the United States shortly. The more cultural difference manifests itself one-sidedly, the more minority groups will shrink in number. It is high time to initiate concrete steps. Whoever wants to keep our church from serious damage, has to act. Now! ■

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